

The Golden Flaw

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Illustrated by Arthur William Brown



lently that the umbrella rocked in his grip, permitting several large drops to descend on his companion. "Have a heart," she begged. "Can't you wait till you get home to start shimming? This is a new lid I've got on."

"It made me jump," explained Lancelot apologetically. "I came from Ostoria, too."

"Yes?" she seemed unimpressed by the coincidence. "That so?"

"But don't you think," said Lancelot, rather damped, "that it's an extraordinary thing that we should both have come from Ostoria?"

"Oh, I don't know. I can't imagine any one who was ever in Ostoria not coming from it. It's about the best little burg to get out of that I ever struck."

"But—but—but—" A belated spasm of shyness caused Lancelot to stammer. "But—I mean—it makes a sort of bond between us."

"Does it? All right. Have it your own way." She looked at him with frank surprise. "Do you really want to go back there?"

"As soon as I can put by enough money. I haven't been there in ten years. I suppose the place is quite changed now?"

"You bet! You know the Garfield House?"

"On Main Street, as you go up from the depot?"

"Yes. Well, it used to be red, and a couple of years ago they painted it green. There's always something doing in Ostoria. Moving all the time! Well, here we are." They stopped at the entrance of the subway. "Thanks for the umbrella."

"You're welcome," said Lancelot. "I wonder—I wonder—"

"Yes?"

"Well, couldn't I—couldn't we—"

"I'll bet we could. Couldn't we what?"

"May I come and see you some evening?"

"Sure!" said the girl heartily. "Come any old evening you like and take me to the movies. Well, goodbye. Be good, and don't take any wooden nickels."

She dived into the flood of humanity that poured through the subway entrance, and was swept away. Lancelot remained where he stood. His body was blocking the sidewalk, but his spirit was soaring aloft on a rosy cloud.

ON THE following Sunday, dressed in his most telling clothes, Lancelot called at the little uptown flat where she lived with the blond lady cashier of the Cosmopolis barber shop. Lancelot was not aware until he climbed up four flights of stairs and was admitted into the pillbox sitting room of the flat that this partnership had been formed; and he surveyed the cashier, as she rose hospitably from her chair to greet him, with mixed feelings. In a way, her presence was embarrassing. There had been a time, when he had had the chair next to the cashier's desk, they had become rather intimate. Indeed, at the crisis of this period he had been on the verge of a warmer feeling than mere friendship, and had only been deterred from going further into the matter by the fact that the cashier's hair was so manifestly peroxide. And Lancelot loathed peroxide. For many reasons he would have preferred her absence on this occasion to her company. But there was one reason why he was distinctly glad that she was there. After a promising start he had begun to feel abominably shy one more, and he welcomed anything at this juncture that would prevent a tête-à-tête with May. And the cashier, who was a great conversationalist, was a useful person to have along with you when you felt like that. He took them both to the movies and sat between them.

Taking them to the movies and sitting between them became a habit. At first he did it every Sunday; then, growing bolder, he did it once in the middle of the week. After a while he was always dropping in and taking them to the movies.

Whatever may be said against the motion pictures from an artistic point of view—and candor compels one to admit that in the main they are pretty fierce—there is one thing in their favor as far as the shy and diffident man is concerned. They are a great aid to courtship. In the dim light, with soft music going all the time, Lancelot found that he could let himself go in a manner quite beyond him under other conditions. At the end of the second week, taking advantage of a peculiarly glib moment in the affairs of a female star and her support, he ventured to clasp May's hand in his, and was electrified to find that she showed no resentment. He squeezed her hand through two entire reels.

TWO days later, having climbed the stairs, he found May alone in the sitting room. He was conscious of a flutter of hope, but he

did not allow it to flutter too much. "Where's Miss Bagster?" he asked.

The girl looked at him in what seemed to Lancelot a rather odd way. He was a sensitive young man, and he fancied that there was a certain chill in the atmosphere. He could not account for this.

"She's gone out. She had a date."

"Oh," said Lancelot.

In the effort to keep the joy out of his voice he did perhaps affect a regret which was a little exaggerated. Indeed, as a matter of fact, he spoke as if he had just heard the news of the death of a dear friend. A faint pink flush came into May's face and she bit her lip.

"Yes, I suppose you are disappointed," she said frostily.

This monstrous accusation completely deprived Lancelot of speech, and May went on with her remarks. "It's too bad, isn't it? I told her you would be all broken up, but she would go."

"But—" Lancelot tried to find words to refute the charge. "But—"

He could get no further. The girl's manner chilled him. There was an awkward silence. May fiddled with a magazine.

"Then," said Lancelot, "then, shall we go out?"

"No. I don't want to go out."

"There's a good picture at the Bijou Dream," persevered the poor fish. "Cuthbert Erickson in 'Why Men Go Wrong'." There was more silence. "Wouldn't you like to see it?" he asked.

"No!" The magazine fell to the floor. May was looking away from him and speaking rapidly. "I don't ever want to go to the movies with you again! I'm sick of being the third party! If you want to take Ellabelle"—this was the lady cashier's revolting name—"take her. I don't care! But don't keep up all this silly nonsense of wanting me alone. I'm sick of it! Life's too short!"

"What—what—what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean! Ellabelle told me you were her beau."

"What!"

"She said you've always been crazy about her."

Lancelot rallied himself. There are moments in the life of even the most diffident man when circumstances force him into a display of vigor and decision. For an instant he felt strong and commanding. He grabbed at May's hand. She shook him off. He seized her by the shoulders.

"I wasn't! I'm not! I love you!"

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"You don't, either!"

"I do!"

"Suppose Ellabelle came in now and heard you?"

"I wouldn't care!"

"Ellabelle?"

"Oh, darn Ellabelle!"

"You don't really love me?"

"Yes, I do!"

"No, you don't!"

"Yes, I do!"

"You don't!"

"I do!"

"You don't, either!"

"Yes, I do! I do! I do!"

"Honest?"

"I don't believe you do!"

"Yes, I do!"

"You don't, either!"

"Yes, I do!"

"I T IS all very well to expect story writers to be realistic, but with white paper at its present price one simply must abbreviate the modern love scene. Suffice it to say that, by the time the score card showed May with twenty-four "No you don'ts," while crediting Lancelot with twenty-five "Yes, I do's," they were sitting side by side on the sofa, and Lancelot was stroking her wonderful hair, an engaged man.

The first jarring note was struck by May.

"Darling!"

"Yes, darling?"

"I won't live in Ostoria."

"Oh, precious?"

"Well, I won't! Sitting all day on the porch watching the farmers whizz by in their hay wagons isn't my idea of a large existence. I'm going to live in New York."

"But, honey! I've been saving up for years."

"I don't care! If you want me you'll have to stay in New York."

"But, precious!"

"If you really love me, you would do as I ask you."

"Of course, but—"

"But I don't believe you really do love me."

"I do!"

"No, you don't!"

"Yes, I do!"

"You don't, either!"

"I do!"

"Well, if you did, you would do as I asked you!"

Lancelot yielded. He gave in.

MAY was as good as gold, but she did like attention and she did like flattery.

Her glorious hair was tickling the tip of his nose and he succumbed. He had a momentary vision of that little up-to-date barber-shop, and it seemed to gaze reproachfully at him. Then it was shut out by the spectacle of that wonderful cloud of dusky hair.

"All right!" he said.

"You'll live in New York?"

"Yes."

"You're a darling," said May, and kissed him.

ONE result of their new relationship was that Lancelot now found himself regarding with jealousy the customers who came to May's table to have their nails manicured. It was useless for him to argue with himself that business was business, and that when May smiled, chaffed and chatted with these persons she did so in a purely professional capacity. It may have been the subconscious realization that May's smiles and badinage were not after all so purely professional that disturbed his soul. They had been engaged now for some weeks and intimacy had revealed her character to him. May was as good as gold, but she did like attention, she did like flattery, she did enjoy the companionship of others besides her mate.

Lancelot began to classify these customers of May's in a sort of Dantesque series of hells. In the lowest and innermost hell of all he placed by himself an aggressive young man with an impudent, good-looking face who was the most regular of all the attendants at May's table. This exorcism came in every other day, and Lancelot had a curious feeling, a sort of instinctive fear, that sooner or later his happiness was to be affected by him. It is a truism that the things we worry about seldom happen; but they sometimes do, and they did in this case. Walking home after the movies one night Lancelot perceived that there was something on May's mind. When she reached her door she spoke.

"Larry."

At an early stage in their engagement she had declined emphatically and once for all to call him Lancelot. The more attractive substitute had been her own invention.

"Yes?" said Lancelot.

He was conscious of a foreboding. "Larry," said May again, looking down the street and avoiding his eye.

"Yes, honey."

"There's a fellow who comes to my table pretty often. I don't know if you've noticed him. He dresses kind of bright."

"I've noticed him," said Lancelot grimly.

"He's press agent for one of the new shows. He wants me to go on the stage."

"What?"

"Well, why shouldn't I?" said May, flaring up. She felt more at ease now that it was possible to carry the thing through with spirit and fire. "I've gotta right to have a little pleasure, haven't I? I think you're awful mean!"

Then, swiftly abandoning the attitude militant, she melted into sobs. Intimacy had revealed Lancelot's character to her, as it had revealed hers to Lancelot.

She had gauged him correctly. His rigidity softened on a flash. He put

his arms around her and petted her. Presently the sobs stopped.

"If I'd known you would be horrid and bully me I'd never have told you," she moaned brokenly.

"Honey!" protested Lancelot.

"Well, you were horrid!"

"I didn't mean to be."

"Well, you were."

"I didn't mean to be!"

"But you were!"

"I didn't mean to be. . . . But, girly! The stage!"

"Well, what's wrong with the stage?"

"Nothing, but—"

"I see what it is! You don't love me!"

"Yes, I do!"

"No, you don't!"

"Yes, I do!"

"No, you don't! If you did you wouldn't mind my having a little fun."

A POLICEMAN passed slowly, casting an appraising glance at them as he went by. The policeman was a man of the world, a man of experience.

"She's working the poor boob for something," said the policeman to himself. "And she's got him going! Girls!" said the policeman with a large, tolerant amusement. And passed on.

He was perfectly right. In another minute Lancelot had capitulated.

"I only want you to be happy, darling," he said weakly.

"You are a dear!" said May.

She kissed him.

"The rehearsals are starting right away," said May, speaking rapidly. "This fellow says he's sure he can get me a job in the chorus. It's going to be a dandy show. He says. It's called 'Oh, Mabel!' or something. Good night, dear!"

She vanished abruptly, leaving Lancelot with a dim feeling that something had been put over on him.

IN THE days before he had met May Lancelot had frequently been lonely; but it had been a vague loneliness, hardly to be recognized for what it was. It had never brought with it that aching sense of loss and desolation which haunted him during the working day after she had left the Cosmopolis. And presently even the consolation of seeing her in the evening was taken from him, for the chorus of her musical comedy began to rehearse at night.

Sometimes he was able to meet her after these night rehearsals; and, when he did, he noticed that already a subtle change had begun in her. She had not precisely toughened, but she had certainly taken on some of the distinguishing marks of her new profession. She was full of stories of the other girls. Somebody had given Tot a sunburst; Pickles had had an awful call-down from the stage director; the net result of all of which was to give Lancelot the sensation of being out of it, of having lost touch with her. A sullen resentment began to grow in him against the press agent—his name was Harry Fletcher.

When the show opened on the road and she left town, Lancelot plumbed the depths. His faithful scissors still worked on automatically, but his thoughts were far away. Once a customer tipped him a cent by mistake, and he never even noticed it.

"She's All Right"—for that was now the title of the piece, vice "Oh, Mabel!" and six other titles superseded—had opened in Detroit and

was working its way east in one-week jumps. Lancelot ticked off the days on a special route sheet of his own, which he had pinned up over his bed. He held out up to the Washington week, and then he obtained special leave of absence and rushed to the Pennsylvania station. All the way down in the train his heart was singing within him at the prospect of meeting her.

The trouble about hearts is that they sing too soon. It is painful to have to record it, but—from Lancelot's point of view—the meeting was an even worse frost than "She's All Right" was when, a week later, it opened in New York.

He met her at the stage door. For an appreciable space of time Lancelot stood in a narrow alleyway, while girls of all sizes brushed past him. They all stared at him and they all giggled. It was Lancelot's first experience of this sort of thing, and it reduced his sensibilities to a frazzle. By the time May finally emerged, looking trim and neat in blue serge, with a small hat on top of her beautiful hair, he was perfectly limp.

She was humming a tune as she came out, and when she saw him she stopped dead.

"Larry!"

Lancelot was too far gone by this time to appreciate subtle voice inflections or he would have noted that she spoke more with surprise than pleasure.

"Whatever are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," said Lancelot.

"But. . . . Well, why didn't you send me a wire? Then I wouldn't have made a date."

"Have you got a date?" he said dully. The disappointment was numbing. Washington is an attractive city, but he had not made a four-hour journey just to inspect its interesting public buildings.

"Well, you ought to have wired," said May defensively. "How was I to know? Mr. Fletcher asked me to go out to supper, so, of course, I said I would."

"Fletcher?"

"Why not?" she said a little shrilly. "Why shouldn't I go out to supper with Mr. Fletcher? He's the press agent of the show, and he can do me a lot of good. I want to get on, don't I? Something in the blank unhappiness of Lancelot's face made her change her tone. "You mustn't be silly, Larry, dear," she said more gently. "It doesn't amount to anything. Mr. Fletcher's a perfect gentleman. But I must go out with him when he asks me, mustn't I, if he can do me a lot of good?"

There was a silence.

"Well, I mustn't be late," said May at length.

"No," said Lancelot.

"I'm very sorry."

"It's all right."

"Well, good night."

"Good night."

THEIR ways parted at the entrance of the alley. Lancelot walked listlessly off. There was an accusing voice within him which told him that once again he had failed to play a heroic part. It pointed out that May was not the sort of girl a man could hold by tactics like his. She needed a firm and resolute hand. In a moment of clear vision he saw that sooner or later, behaving in this limp way, he must lose her. She would grow to despise him. What girl, demanded the inner voice, could help despising a man who let another man walk

(Continued on next page)

ON THE cheek of the stout man who reclined in the barber's chair there still lingered a small patch of unclaimed jungle. Lancelot Purvis removed this with his gleaming razor and, stepping back, surveyed his handiwork with silent satisfaction; for he was a conscientious barber and took pleasure in making a good job of it. He now produced a steaming towel, dumped it on the stout man's face, kneaded it awhile, applied witch hazel and finally jabbed the face with a second towel.

"Face massage, sir?"

"No!"

"Hair a little long at the ends. Trim it, sir?"

"No!"

"Anything on the head, sir?"

"No!"

"Singe the hair, sir?"

"NO!"

Lancelot had no more suggestions to make. The stout man heaved himself up from the chair, breathed a little stertorously, put on his collar, tipped Lancelot and walked out. The episode was ended.

The advantage of being a really great writer, one of the big-browed lads who make every stroke tell and all that sort of thing, is that you save so much time. Take myself, for instance. I don't want to quote about it, you understand. I quote realize that it is simply a gift, coming, who shall say whence? I merely wish to point out as a matter of artistic interest that in this single short scene my wonderful skill in character-delineation has enabled you to visualize Lancelot Purvis as clearly as though you had known him for years. With a few evocative touches I have made you recognize his shrinking nature, his mildness, his sensitiveness, his diffidence. . . . What? You didn't? You didn't gather the fact that Lancelot was a mild, diffident young man? . . . Well, then, all I can say is that something must have gone wrong with the works, and I suppose I shall have to approach the thing all over again from another angle. But really, when I showed the customer snapping out "No!" to everything Lancelot suggested and Lancelot taking it quite meekly and not even having the nerve to try to sell him a hair wash, I did think I could leave the rest to the intelligence of the reader. . . .

THERE are some men who in the battle of life seem consistently to get the loser's end, and this after a time tends to remove the steel from their character. Lancelot Purvis was one of these. All through his early boyhood he had had much to suffer from the juvenile population of his native town, on whose immature minds the name Lancelot had had the worst effects. When he was thirteen he caught measles and shot up five or six inches, attaining a height which intimidated his peers into leaving him alone. But by that time the mischief was done and Lancelot was a hopelessly mild boy. And when he reached the early twenties and might shortly become normal again the war broke out and the draft got him. And that started the trouble all over again.

He never succeeded in getting to the front. Chaperoned by a sergeant, he looked after horses in the rear of the lines, and several months of this undid Lancelot completely. There were, no doubt, in the American Expeditionary Forces sergeants of the most winning amiability; but Lancelot's was rather a violent and

hasty sort of man, full of strange oaths and reluctant to make allowances. It was a physically tough but spiritually battered barber who, about a year later, returned to the Hotel Cosmopolis.

Safe back beside his chair in the Cosmopolis Shaving Parlor, Lancelot was again happy. Barbering was in his blood. His father had been a barber. His earliest memories were of the clinging scent of hair washes. There was, moreover, a marked artistic strain in him which found expression in the exercise of his trade. After all, to the thoughtful man, being a barber is much the same as being a sculptor. The sculptor takes a shapeless block of marble and chips off all that is unnecessary and superfluous. What else does a barber do? There were times, after he had seen a customer come in with a scrub of beard and a mop of hair falling over his collar and, after chipping away all that was superfluous, had watched him walk out, dapper and trim and a pleasure to look at, when Lancelot felt the glow of the creator.

SUCH, then, was Lancelot Purvis on the morning of the 7th of April, the date on which for the first time in his life he set eyes on May Gleason.

Once or twice in the day of a New York barber there arrives the Star Customer, the man of comprehensive outlook and unbounded ambition, who wishes to make himself 100 per cent perfect not only as regards his hair and face, but in all the outlying portions of him. One of his species came to Lancelot's chair on the morning of the 7th of April and just lay back and said "Yes!" to everything. He wanted a haircut, a twice-over shave, a face massage, a singe, a dry shampoo and something for the scalp. He wanted his shoes shined and he wanted a manicure. It must have been his birthday or something.

It was at this point that May Gleason stepped daintily into Lancelot's life.

The manicure girls at the Cosmopolis, as a rule, meant little to Lancelot. He hardly noticed them. They were just there. Yet somehow the very first glimpse of May Gleason set his heart jumping so quickly that he found it difficult to keep his mind on his job. Fortunately, by years of practice he got his scissors so trained that they worked almost of their own volition. Consequently, he was enabled to look a good deal at this remarkable girl, as she bent demurely over the customer's fingers. He could catch only an occasional glimpse of her face. But that did not worry him, for what he wanted to look at was her hair.

If there was one thing in the world that had the power to stir Lancelot to the depths it was beautiful hair. And this girl's was the most beautiful he had ever seen. It was dark hair, dark! The word is feeble. It was like a great rolling black wave. It was like a soft, brooding cloud. It was like a moonless night. It was like water under the stars.

He looked down at her. And, as he did so, she happened to look up. She smiled. And the subjugation of Lancelot was complete.

CUPID gives quick service. That very evening Lancelot found opportunity of speaking to her. It was raining as he came out into the world at the end of his day's labors, and he was just opening his umbrella when out stepped this girl. Like the feather-brained little thing she was, she had omitted to provide

LANCELOT regarded with jealousy the customers who came to May's table

herself with any protection whatsoever against the elements. She wore a thin dress and a fragile-looking hat, and she stood peering out at the downpour with some alarm.

"Oh, hooray!" she said, spying Lancelot, who was wavering between chivalry and shyness. "Would you mind seeing me as far as the subway?"

Lancelot gulped. He would have liked to say "Delighted!" or "Charmed!" or one of the things that would have come naturally to the heroes of the novels he read. But he shoved the umbrella over her and they set off.